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SLAIN U.S. MAJOR HAD ONE EXPLOIT

Reportedly Got Into a Soviet
Tank and Photographed It
on New Year's Eve

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BONN, April 23 — A Western intelligence source said today that the United States Army major who was shot and killed last month by a Soviet sentry in East Germany had carried out an earlier mission in which he sneaked into a Soviet tank and photographed the interior.

The source, who has intimate knowledge of the operations of the unit to which the major was attached, said that in what was described as "a specially planned operation" the American, Maj. Arthur D. Nicholson Jr., took advantage of the drunken revelry of Soviet troops on New Year's Eve at an unidentified base in East Germany.

The source said the American officer slipped into a tank shed and photographed "not their very latest one, but almost."

The Western source said he believed the Russians were not aware of the American officer's exploit. He declined to name the site where the infiltration took place or the kind of tank photographed.

Part of 14-Man Team

Major Nicholson, a 37-year-old Russian-speaking officer, was attached to the 14-man American military liaison mission based in Potsdam, outside East Berlin. Since 1947, the mission has been allowed to roam in the former Soviet occupied zone of Germany, conducting what amounts to legally sanctioned espionage.

Under similar accords, British and French teams also tour the East German countryside on the lookout for Soviet and East German maneuvers and missile sites. The Soviet Union has three similar missions accredited to the erstwhile American, French and British sectors of what is now West Germany.

The liaison units are famed for their risk-taking and occasionally dangerous adventures, which in East Germany have entailed temporary detentions, car ramblings and scuffles with Soviet and East German soldiers.

A year ago, a French soldier was killed near Halle in East Germany when his car was rammed head-on by a heavy-duty East German military vehicle in what some members of the liaison teams regarded as a thinly disguised homicide. After complaints by French military commanders, the Soviet military was said to have promised to prevent similar occurrences, according to Western diplomats.

Soviet Troops Have Been Caught

Although both the Soviet and North Atlantic Treaty Organization commands declare areas off-limits for the liaison missions, the teams are renowned for stretching the rules and sneaking into restricted areas. Soviet liaison troops have been caught climbing over the fences of NATO bases, according to Western diplomatic sources.

According to the official American version, Major Nicholson was shot without warning on March 24 by a Soviet sentry as the major was photographing through the window of a Soviet tank shed near the town of Ludwigslust. American officials have described the major as being 300 to 500 yards away from a restricted zone, but in an area that until the month before had been a restricted zone.

The Soviet Union has maintained that Major Nicholson was in a restricted area and, in the words of a statement issued by its embassy in Washington on Monday, was "an unknown intruder who was carrying out an intelligence mission and did not comply with the warnings of the sentry who was acting in strict compliance with military manuals."

The Nicholson killing has become a serious irritant in Soviet-American relations, and the two nations have openly disagreed over the results of a meeting on April 12 that their commanders in Germany, Gen. Glenn K. Otis and Gen. Mikhail M. Zaitsev, held in Potsdam to avoid similar incidents in the future.

Reserves Right to Use Force

The statement issued by the Soviet Embassy on Monday said the Russians reserved the right to use force against unknown intruders. The statement took issue with an account issued by the State Department six days earlier that said General Zaitsev had given assurances that his military personnel would not use weapons or force against the American teams in East Germany.

The Western intelligence source who disclosed Major Nicholson's New Year's Eve spying caper also gave fresh details about the circumstances of his shooting. He said the Soviet sentry was in a nearby woods away from his post and may have panicked when he saw the major near the shed.

The first shots, he said, were directed toward the car in which the major's partner, Sgt. Jessie G. Schatz, was sitting, in conformity with liaison procedures. Those shots missed.

One member of a liaison team is always supposed to remain in his vehicle, which is typically crammed with sophisticated listening devices and photographic material; the car cannot be searched under the mission's quasi-diplomatic ground rules.

After the major was hit by a second volley, Sergeant Schatz was detained by the sentry and other soldiers. Some time later, a Soviet colonel arrived by helicopter at the site, the source said. He said the colonel berated Sergeant Schatz for not respecting a Soviet officer and asked the American, "Why did you shoot your officer?"